

# Charlie's Story

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# A Taboo Is Broken

**H**ave you ever done the lottery? In our house every Saturday it was a ritual. Dad would come home from the early shift in the pub with a clutch of tickets. Then Noel and Vinnie, my uncles, and Peter, my dad, would sit around the table in Granny Bea's kitchen talking about how we'd spend the money if we won. Afterwards it was round to the sweet shop to put our numbers on the computer and into Paddy McCormack's for a pint (and a blackcurrant and lemonade for me, please, no ice). So to begin with, that Saturday started out the same as all the rest.

"There's one and a half million up for grabs tonight, I heard on the radio," Noel said, as he spooned coffee into the mugs and poured on boiling water.

Dad hung his coat on the back of a chair and dealt out the lottery papers, scattering them in four untidy piles in

front of our chairs. “Two panels, Charlie,” he said to me, “that’s your lot, I’m not made of money.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “And I suppose you’ll be looking for the money back, if my numbers win.”

“You’re not kidding. I’ll be wanting a lot more than a quid.”

For a couple of minutes there was silence in the kitchen as each of us gave serious thought to what we hoped would be the magical combination of birthdays, house numbers, bus routes, and car registrations that would transform our lives, showering us with wealth and choices and opportunities.

“What would you do, Uncle Noel, if you won?” I said when I’d finished. I always asked him first—that was part of the ritual. Changing the order would wreck all our chances, just like coming up with a different way to spend the money every week was supposed to ward off bad luck. Our real dreams we kept hugged to ourselves.

Noel sucked in his cheeks. “If I got the big one? A farm, I think I might buy a farm.”

Dad snorted with derision. “Jesus, Noel, you might as well take the money out to the far end of Dún Laoghaire pier and hurl it into the ocean.”

“What do you mean? What’s wrong with getting a farm?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong with it. You know nothing about animals. The closest brush you ever had with animal breeding was a dose of head lice.” He picked up his coffee and winked at me.

“Ha, bloody ha,” said Noel, offended. “We’re talking gentleman farmer here. I wouldn’t be the one walking about in pig-muck. It’d be an investment.” He reached across the table and helped himself to one of my dad’s cigarettes. (Noel is always giving up smoking so he only smokes other people’s.) “I could have a ranch in South America. I wouldn’t stay here anyway, not on your life.”

Nobody spoke. Noel’s bottom lip had turned inside out, the way it always did when he was in a huff. I knew it was my job to bring down the temperature again. I am a one-woman peace negotiator in this house. Don’t get me wrong—it’s not that they fight and argue and raise their voices. No, they do the exact opposite. Everybody clams up.

“What would you do, Dad?” I said, jogging him with my elbow. I could tell he had been waiting for this moment. He had probably been bursting to tell us his latest scheme since inspiration struck him. It usually did when he was pulling pints in the pub at lunchtime.

“Wait till you hear this, Charlie.” His eyes were shining. “This is inspiration, with a capital I.” He paused for a bit of dramatic effect, to make sure we were all paying attention. “Cable cars up to the top of Errigal!”

“You what?” Noel and I looked at one another, rolling our eyes. Errigal was a cone-shaped mountain in Donegal that we had all climbed one summer.

“It’ll be the greatest tourist attraction in Ireland,” Peter rushed on, “there’s nothing like it in the entire country. We’d easily double our money. People would come from all over. I’d set up a whole string of cars coming from the far side of

Dunlewey lake, and up the side of the mountain. We could have a sort of running commentary all about the local history, and then right up at the top a panoramic platform, 360 degrees, coffee and tea, telescopes... We'd double our money in no time."

I moved Dad's cup further in toward the middle of the kitchen table out of danger. He was waving his arms about, getting all worked up. As pipe dreams went, this was a brand new one. I even liked the sound of it but you could see that Vinnie was not impressed—he drew in his breath loudly and pursed his lips. Perfectly formed rings of cigarette smoke floated slowly toward the ceiling. Dad looked at him uneasily.

"Weather," Vinnie said at last, moving his head from side to side in slow motion. "Have you thought how often it gets a wee bit cloudy and rainy up there in Donegal? Jesus, let's face it, you'd be closed more often than you'd be open."

"No way, they do it in Canada," Dad snapped back. "Myself and Lisa were up this mountain in the Rockies, gondolas they call cable cars there. We passed over the top of a bear, I swear. Lisa nearly went bananas."

Lisa. That was it. My mother's name. He didn't even notice he'd said it. In more than ten years no one had ever mentioned my mother's name. I could scarcely breathe as the three men's voices chattered on in the background.

"One little snag there, Peter, old son," Noel was saying. "There are no bears in Donegal."

"No," agreed my dad. He drew heavily on his cigarette and knitted his eyebrows together. "Maybe we could put big

polystyrene models of them, dotted here and there up the mountain sides.”

“And a herd of plastic giant red Irish deer lapping at the side of the lake. Very realistic plastic.” Noel hit the table with the side of his hand as the madness of the scheme seduced him. The three brothers clutched at each other, killing themselves laughing.

“Dad,” I said, quietly. “That was my mum’s name, wasn’t it? Lisa?”

They turned to look at me with shocked horrified expressions, their jaws hanging open. An ancient taboo had been broken. No one knew what to do. The three of them all reached simultaneously for the cigarette packet lying open in the middle of the lottery tickets and the dirty coffee cups.



# Coming Out of the Tunnel

**N**o one had ever said anything about what happened, neither Dad nor Granny Bea nor any of the uncles, but I could tell when they were thinking about it. There was just something about the way they looked at me and tilted their head to one side that I knew meant they were wondering, does she remember, does she remember anything at all?

Every year, especially around Christmas, I sensed the tension mount beneath the fevered preparations for the holidays. I saw the arched eyebrows and inquiring looks they exchanged among themselves if they came across me in a room by myself or looking a bit thoughtful. Everyone went out of their way to be kind, bringing me glasses of Coke when I was watching television and hinting mischievously about the presents I would be getting in the morning. Now and again one of the uncles would walk unsteadily into the sitting room and give me a beery hug, saying something

like, this will be the best Christmas ever, just you wait and see. What they didn't know and didn't dare ask was that I had remembered everything, everything but her name.

I remembered the roar of the train as it came rushing out of the tunnel and rattled to a stop at the platform. The woman, my mother, had pulled me along underground passages, past a man who was playing a guitar, and up the moving stairs—a long, long wooden staircase stretching as far as I could see. I stepped on to the creaking slats and stood to one side like the other people but Mum wouldn't let the stairs do the work of carrying us up to the top. She jabbed my shoulder and pushed me up the stairs in front of her. I still remember the ache behind my knees, as my little legs climbed on and on and on, trying to avoid the parcels that banged against me.

It could have been outside a Body Shop that she left me. Even now sometimes when I'm walking past the branch on Grafton Street and smell that peculiar sweet fruity smell wafting out of the door, I can picture her thin white face leaning over me and saying, wait here a minute, Charlie, I have to make a phone call. My face must have crinkled up as if I might cry for she had put her face even closer to mine and said (in a very level controlled voice that I knew spelled trouble), "Charlie, come on, Charlie, don't make a fuss." So I waited quietly, sitting on the little step outside the Body Shop, waiting for my mother to come back.

Can you believe that I was all but invisible to those millions of rushing people? A kid on her own in a big London railway station? It's incredible. (Now everywhere I go I have

to keep my eyes peeled trying to spot lost children. I'm always swooping down on solitary wandering infants in supermarkets and chain stores.) I've no idea how long I sat there, in that London station, growing cold and hungry but knowing I must not make a fuss. "Don't fuss, Charlie," that's about the only thing I can remember my mother saying to me, "I can't cope if you fuss." So I never did.

All that afternoon only one woman, on her way out of the shop, stopped and asked me if I was lost. I remembered her suddenly looming up in front of me as she bent down. She had big green eyes, hair tied back in a springy ponytail, and a face that seemed to be frowning and smiling at the same time.

"I'm waiting for my mum," I said, "she's in the phone box."

The woman scrunched up her eyes as if she might have been nearsighted and looked around the station, probably looking for the public telephone booths. Now when I think of her, I suppose she had been concerned. But it was Christmas Eve after all—no one wants to be drawn into someone else's hassles at a time like that. She probably had more shopping to do. I smiled to make her feel better. That's another thing my mother had trained me to do. "Smile, goddam you, Charlie. We don't want to look at your big sad face." The woman with green eyes had smiled back.

"If you're sure, then, sweetheart..."

Her voice had trailed off and she hurried away toward the trains, looking back once over her shoulder and giving me a guilty wave.

I don't know how much longer I was there. I remember the legs rushing past, legs in trousers, legs in boots, legs sticking out from under long coats, legs in short skirts, white legs, black legs. Bags banged against me but not one single goddam person said "excuse me." My bottom grew cold sitting on the cold step and I needed to have a pee. I pressed my legs tightly together and tried counting to one hundred like Mum or one of her friends had taught me but it was too hard. I kept forgetting where I had got to, distracted by the travel announcements crackling over the intercom and by the pushing shoving crowds. In the end I stood up and skipped on one leg and then the other, jiggling away to stop myself wetting my pants.

And then a policeman was bending down over me and saying, "Well, young lady, where's your mummy then?" and suddenly the shaming warm yellow pee was running down my legs and into my shoes.

Dad and Uncle Vinnie came to pick me up at the police station later that night.

"This is your dad," said the nice lady who had been with me. "He's going to take you back to his house for Christmas."

I didn't know who he was—I don't think I even knew what a "dad" was.

The next morning we went on a plane and the air hostess gave me a book to color in and a model of an airplane that I still have on the window-ledge of my bedroom along with the Gary Gatwick teddy that Vinnie bought me. Dad and Vinnie drank little bottles of wine all the way over to

Dublin and Dad said over and over, “Jesus, Vinnie, I can’t believe that slag could leave a child of four years old just like that. I’ll kill her if I ever clap eyes on her again.”

“At least the cow put your phone number in the kid’s pocket,” Vinnie said.

At the airport in Dublin, there were photographers waiting for us when we came through customs. Vinnie lifted me up in his arms because Dad was carrying a bag of duty-free that clinked as he walked. When the reporters pressed forward, Vinnie pushed my head down on to his shoulders and shouted, leave the child alone, will you, and Dad thumped a cameraman who came too near. Then we went to Granny Bea’s house where Christmas dinner was waiting. I had a huge family I knew nothing about—two more uncles, Noel and Chris, as well as Dad and Vinnie and Granny Bea.

I was very quiet, frightened, I suppose, by all the strange people and the funny way they talked. Dad had to cut up my meat in small pieces. He showed me how to hold a knife and fork and tucked a big red napkin under my chin. Before then, with Lisa, I had mostly eaten bags of chips and fruit and stuff that didn’t have to be cooked. The whole family sat around the table, watching me.

Afterwards, I fell asleep still sitting at the table. Someone carried me upstairs to bed and even though I didn’t want to be on my own in the big unfamiliar bedroom, I didn’t cry and didn’t make a fuss. Everybody stood around the end of the bed looking at me and saying I was a great kid and a real little looker into the bargain and Granny Bea said wasn’t it

a mercy that nothing worse had happened, considering some of the weirdos that you get in London.

So I stayed on, growing up in the big house near Dún Laoghaire, pretending like the rest of them that nothing odd had ever happened, that I had always been there. I suppose my life was normal after that—I went to school and learned to ride a bike and swim and do a back-somersault. Uncle Chris went to live in Boston but Vinnie and Noel and Dad still live here. Dad's a barman now though he used to change jobs nearly as often as I changed class. He's been a painter and a driver and a postman. Last summer he had a sort of oven on wheels and sold baked potatoes outside pubs until someone threatened to report him for food poisoning. (Though Dad said it was hardly his fault: the potato was the least of the man's problems after the amount of booze he'd had.) Every so often, Granny Bea tells him he should have finished his exams and made something of himself, he was wasting a good brain.

I sometimes have flashbacks about the London thing, like when I walk past the Body Shop, or sometimes when I hear Christmas carols. Once, a year or so ago, I was watching a documentary about homeless people in London and they showed a tube station and one of those big wooden escalators. My stomach turned over. I was all by myself in the house except for Granny who was in the kitchen ironing. I went out to talk to her about it—my mouth was so dry I didn't even know that I was going to be able to speak—I could feel my throat tightening—but when I saw her at the ironing board, a strand of her gray-blond hair

falling over her face, she looked too fragile, too easily wounded, I didn't like to make a fuss.

So until last summer when my dad let it slip out about seeing the bear in Canada, no one had ever mentioned my mother's name in more than ten years or spoken about how I came to be here. Little did I think that soon everyone would find out that I was the Abandoned Baby.